

Disruption in the U.S. Accreditation Space

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It is a time of disruption, in politics and government, in many national economies and cultures. In the United States, disruption has also penetrated the accreditation space, with debates and differences about student achievement, access and affordability and transparency, topics also challenging quality assurance around the world. Higher education, accreditation and quality assurance are not immune from the current swirl of competing ideas and views. Today, US accreditation is undergoing a seismic shift. What has been the primary form of quality assurance and quality improvement in the United States for more than 100 years is being repositioned. It is shifting from an independent, collegial process by which higher education decides and evaluates academic quality on its own to a compliance-driven process by which external stakeholders decide and apply requirements for quality that accreditors are to use. This shift involves four major changes. The first change is in who provides oversight and takes the lead in accreditation. The second change is in how quality is defined. The third change is about accountability: for what and to whom accreditation is answerable. The fourth is in how accreditation itself is to operate.



Until recently, the complex array of 85 private, nongovernmental institutional and programmatic U.S. accrediting organizations have been operating independently, managing and directing their own work. This continued even as, in the 1950s, accreditors became engaged with the U.S. federal government to serve as a reliable authority about quality in higher education. Accreditors, working with their institutions and programs, defined quality. They were accountable to these institutions and programs and developed their key accreditation practices with the institutions and programs.

New and Different Oversight of Accreditation

The first major change is that the U.S. federal government has now taken on primary oversight of accreditation, overlaying the longstanding independent operation of these organizations. Government is expanding and deepening its examination of how accrediting organizations operate. It is now probing the performance of accrediting organizations based on its—not accreditors’—expectations of the effectiveness of accredited institutions and programs. This presence of government in accreditation or quality assurance is not unusual in many countries. It is unusual for the United States, given that accreditation emerged from higher education, not government, and that accrediting organizations remain nongovernmental.

A Different Definition of Quality

Government taking the lead in accreditation also means that government, not accreditation, is taking the lead in how quality is defined, the second major change. This is in contrast to relying on the definitions of quality that accreditors have been using for many years, reflected in standards that are required to achieve accredited status. The standards constitute a broad array of expectations about an institution or program, including mission, financial resources, academic standards, curricula, support services for students and facilities. For accreditation, quality has been about having resources and processes essential to achieving institutional or program mission at a high level of performance.

With government defining quality, this concept is narrowed and is now about whether students graduate, obtain employment and have manageable debt from their student loans. This is a shift from the broad, inclusive concept of quality of accreditation to a utilitarian, or pragmatic, definition that ignores the vital role of higher education in intellectual development, in encouraging civic engagement and societal commitment.

For What and to Whom is Accreditation Accountable?

This leads us to the third major change in the accreditation space: the response to “For what, and to whom, is accreditation accountable?” “Accountable for what” is about accreditation now answerable for this different definition of quality as graduation, jobs and limitations on debt. Accountability is now focused, above all, on protecting and serving students for economic well-being and mobility. If a school is accredited, students should graduate in a timely way, should be able to get jobs, and should have debt that is manageable. Accreditors are to be accountable for timely identification and action against poorly performing schools. They are to be accountable for identifying, and taking action with schools that are engaged in questionable recruiting and marketing activities.



“Accountable for whom” is about accreditation now expected to be answerable, first and foremost, to constituents outside higher education—students, government, and the public. It is now no longer enough for accreditors to be accountable to the institutions and programs they review and the higher education community generally, as in the past. Accountability to the broad public arena is emerging as the primary lens through which accreditation is judged. If, for example, an accrediting organization claims to be doing a good job but if the institutions it

accredits graduates few students or has other difficulties, the accrediting organization itself is judged as lacking. What institutions and programs judge as effective accreditation is being superseded by the judgment of the public.

Accreditation Operation No Longer the Same

For much of its history, accreditation has relied on two stout pillars for its review: institutions and programs self-reporting on their quality and effectiveness, accompanied by peer review or academics validating the reporting. The fourth major change is that these pillars of accreditation are no longer viewed as providing adequate information and a sound basis for accreditation to judge academic quality. Especially in the case of institutional accreditation, self-report and peer review are now considered less reliable. These practices are continuing, but, increasingly, there are calls for self-report and peer review to be augmented by external verification of data and information. In addition, government and the public are calling for documentation of specific levels of performance of institutions and programs, going beyond the typical accreditation review that has focused primarily on resources, process and performance.

Conclusion

This, then, is the disruption in the U.S. accreditation space. Accreditation is no longer fully in charge of its own operation; it is using a definition of quality that it did not establish and may not support; it is accountable for this quality first to the public and not itself; some of its basic features of operation are no longer considered adequate and are being augmented. Accreditation is being repositioned from a process of quality review created and directed by higher education as means of examining its quality to a process now led and directed by government, to examine how well higher education provides for graduation, jobs and minimal debt.

From the perspective of those who welcome and even encourage the disruption, accreditation will be seen as doing a better job, more focused on what students and the public need. For those whose emphasis is on the strength and value of accreditation as it has been: an independent enterprise of peer review and quality improvement, accreditation will have been seriously impaired. However, this disruption is perceived, accreditation will continue to be central to quality review, but in a significantly different way.



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